



Montgomery County Council

For Immediate Release

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Statement on behalf of the County Council by Blair Ewing, chairman of the Council's Health and Human Services Committee

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"The proposal by the County Executive designed to address serious defects in the County's mental health services is welcome and long overdue. We have waited a very long time for him to recognize that there is a crisis in mental health here and that the County must take some responsibility.

"We are glad the County Executive has followed the Council's lead. Over the past fifteen months, the Council has approved over \$1 million to bolster County mental health services and to assist private outpatient mental health clinics in keeping their doors open. We have repeatedly urged the state to do what's right in meeting its responsibility – and today we see some fruits of that effort.

"Also, on February 12, the Council-appointed independent Blue Ribbon Task Force on Mental Health of distinguished professionals in the field will release its report which, judging by its interim statements, will be a stinging critique of the failures of our present system and a clarion call for much needed comprehensive changes.

"Today's announcement is welcome, if late. Much, however, remains to be done.

"On that score, the County Executive said not a word about the urgent need to change State reimbursement procedures for the providers of outpatient mental health care. There is a state study showing that the most efficiently managed clinic can only expect to recover, at most, 85 percent of its costs from the State. A study conducted at the request of the County Council of all the clinics in our county estimated they could expect to recover no more than 80 percent of their costs – due to the high cost of operating in Montgomery County. The State must change its payment schedule."

“Further, there is nothing in the Executive’s statement about the fate of these nine clinics – no plan to keep them operating. There is a clear expectation in his statement that some will fail, but no plan for what happens to the vulnerable, often fragile, people served by these clinics. The consultant hired by the local Department of Health and Human Services also had no plan to handle this very immediate crisis. The Executive says the County will provide training to clinic officials on how to manage better and provide money to make the transition of patients from failing clinics, but for clinic operations there is only money for patients who are uninsured or who have Medicare. None of this will solve the problem of ensuring adequate mental health care to poor people. This is the immediate issue.

“In his remarks at his news conference, the County Executive said that the County’s Blue Ribbon Task Force had been established without his involvement and that county officials had not been allowed to participate. These assertions are flatly untrue. I asked the Executive on several occasions to co-sponsor the Task Force. He declined, saying it would ‘only raise people’s expectations.’

“As for participation, Mr. Short and several members of his staff met with the Task Force several times to discuss what needed to be done about mental health services in the county. Dr. Peel, a staff psychiatrist with the county, attended every meeting and was asked repeatedly for his views. Mr. Hudock, the consultant to Mr. Short who studied the clinics, met with the Task Force several times and participated fully. The Executive said that the Council had given the clinics money without asking for anything in return. This is also flatly untrue. We established criteria for determination of need and applied them in the conditions on the appropriation. We required the audit of the clinics that Mr. Hudock performed.

“The details of the proposal by the County Executive remain to be disclosed. The proposal itself is vague on the sources of the money. It suggests that the State half of the \$1 million will come from County money allocated to the County already by the State and that the County money will come from other County programs, perhaps. We do not know what programs will be cut to make room for this new program. We do not know how much the county access team will be expanded or how the entire program will work.

“I have asked Mr. Duncan to meet with me, in my capacity as chairman of the Health and Human Services Committee, to discuss my concerns and to see if we can develop a joint plan of action.

“I have also asked that the whole matter – including the audit and the needs of the clinics to remain in operation until a real plan for future care of poor people with mental illness can be put in place -- be scheduled as soon as possible for an open session of the Health and Human Services Committee.”

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